

## What Persius Really Thought about Virgil, c. 1600\*

### Abstract

This article focuses on the early modern reception of a single verse from Persius's *Satires*, 'ut ramale vetus vegrandi subere coctum' (1.97).<sup>1</sup> It begins by explaining a four-hundred-year-old, bilingual, terribly rude joke that was inspired by this verse and was told on the London stage. It then develops the explanation of this English-Latin pun into a sustained study of the scholarly reception of that line in early modern commentaries of Persius. Today, classicists consider this line to be part of an impertinent but ultimately inconsequential remark by Persius's interlocutor. As I shall show, however, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, 1.97 was of great critical interest: it was edited as a stand-alone punch-line and interpreted as nothing less than Persius's vindication of Virgil's epic style. For an early modern reader, 1.97 thus promised to reveal what the highly respected Persius thought about the even more admirable Virgil. But what exactly does it mean to say that Virgil's style is 'like an ancient dried-up branch with swollen bark'? Early modern commentators' efforts to explain how this strange simile might function as a defence of the *Aeneid* provide us with fresh sources for the study of Renaissance attitudes to Virgil's epic style. Some of the explanations of 1.97 support and further elucidate what we already know about Renaissance perspectives on Virgilian style; another opens up surprising perspectives on Virgil as a difficult, even crabbed, stylist. I take the latter as an invitation to put ancient, early modern and modern commentators on Virgil's language into dialogue. In a coda, this investigation returns to its place of origin, the early modern London stage and brings its insights to bear on a striking expression in Ben Jonson's *Poetaster*.

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<sup>1</sup> If not otherwise stated, all quotations from Persius and their English translations are taken from Juvenal and Persius, ed. and transl. S. M. Braund, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge MA, 2004.

## I. Persius 1.97 on the Early Modern Stage

In 1607, Lording Barry wrote a racy city comedy entitled *Ram Alley, or Merry Tricks* for the Children of the King's Revels, a children's company which occupied the Whitefriars Playhouse for a little more than a year from 1607–8.<sup>2</sup> *Ram Alley* was central to the company's repertory, which, as Mary Bly has shown in her spirited monograph *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*, was 'strikingly abnormal'.<sup>3</sup> One outstanding linguistic feature of their plays was the so-called Whitefriars pun. Five of the seven comedies specifically written for this troupe showcase female leads who freely voice their desires with a degree of obscenity that is unusual for early modern comedic heroines. Because these characters were played by boys, Bly argues, their phallic jests had a meta-theatrical effect that directed the audiences' attention to the body of the actor:

When a boy actor, dressed as a young woman, puns on 'her' beloved's sexual organs, may he not also reference his own equipment? When Peg in the Whitefriar's play *Cupid's Whirligig* announces, 'I am of my selfe a rare bit', in response to her friend Nan's kindly remark that Peg needs some 'Cramming', the character offers a double-edged pun on sexual genitalia. 'Bit' references the 'crammable' vagina. But 'bit' was a pun applicable to the genitalia of both genders. On a physical level, Peg *has* a

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2000, a growing body of scholarship has discovered the critical potential of *Ram Alley*: M. Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*, Oxford, 2000; C. Cathcart, 'Plural Authorship, Attribution, and the Children of the King's Revels', *Renaissance Forum*, 4.2, 2000, pp. 1–36; id., 'Authorship, Indebtedness, and the Children of the King's Revels', *Studies in English Literature*, 45.2, 2005, pp. 357–74; E. Hanson, '"There's Meat and Money Too": Rich Widows and Allegories of Wealth in Jacobean City Comedy', *English Literary History*, 72.1, 2005, pp. 209–38; A. Griffin, 'Ram Alley and Female Spectatorship', *Early Theatre* 9.2, 2006, pp. 91–7; S. Mukherji, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama*, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 174–84; M. Bly, 'Playing the Tourist in Early Modern London: Selling the Liberties on Stage', *PMLA*, 122.1, 2007, pp. 61–71; J. Lopez, 'Success the Whitefriars Way: *Ram Alley* and the Negative Force of Acting', *Renaissance Drama*, 38, 2010, pp. 199–224; R. D. Fraser, 'Ram Alley, or Merry Tricks (Lording Barry, 1611): A Critical Edition', PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2013; J. Watson, 'Ram Alley and the Staging of Locality: An Innsman goes to the Playhouse', in *Playing and Playgoing in Early Modern England: Actor, Audience, Performance*, ed. S. Smith and E. Whipday, Cambridge, forthcoming c. 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Bly, *Queer Virgins* (n. 2 above), p. 3.

phallic bit, since ‘she’ is played by a boy actor. The gendered ambiguity of her response (‘I am myself a rare bit’), could be explained as a cross-dressing pun. Pen is/has/boasts of two bits, self-lovingly stacked. In a doubly transgressive manoeuvre, she undresses her female character (down to a crammable bit), but at the same moment, she also renders her femaleness into maleness, admitting to ownership of a rare, and phallic, bit.<sup>4</sup>

The sexual *double entendre* in such puns thus resonates with hetero- *and* homoerotic desire, blending female and male sexual organs. Crucially for Whitefriars puns, ‘words that gained their obscenity from adherence to one sexual organ are transferred to a mediatory position between the male and female body. ... Queer puns ricochet between one body and another.’<sup>5</sup> The text of Lording Barry’s comedy abounds in such puns, but its title seems to disappoint the expectations this company so carefully cultivated. True, there is some wordplay in it. Critics have long been aware of the English-Latin homophone in the subtitle: merry tricks/*meretrix* (‘prostitute’).<sup>6</sup> This bilingual pun was common in the period.<sup>7</sup> The main title ‘Ram Alley’ referred to a real-life alley close by the Whitefriars theatre and notorious for its prostitutes. ‘Ram Alley’ could thus be taken as slang for a ‘rammable vagina’.<sup>8</sup> But if we put this together, the result is the monotonous ‘Whore, or Whore’. There is little comedy in this. Does Barry’s title lack the male ‘bit’ that complicates gender assignments into the unruly gaiety of a Whitefriars pun? He did not. It is we who have missed the joke for the past few hundred years.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Mukherji, *Law and Representation* (n. 2 above), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, ed. G. Williams, 3 vols, London, 1994, 2, pp. 586–7.

<sup>8</sup> See the entry for ‘ram’, *ibid.*, 3, pp. 1135–8. There is no entry for ‘alley’, but an analogous example would be ‘road’ for ‘vagina’ (3, pp. 1162–3).

Luckily, there is independent evidence that allows us to reconstruct it: a fuller instance of the same pun was told during the Christmas revels at the Middle Temple in the winter of 1597/8.<sup>9</sup> This ‘solemn’ Christmas season lasted several weeks and consisted of a mixture of speeches, mock trials, processions, masks, dances, music and banquets, which ranged from lofty ceremonialism to ribaldry. One of the entertainments that winter was the mock trial of one Carolus Asinius Bestia, an offender against the rules of courtship. It was held in Middle Temple Hall, the spiritual heart of the institution. Bestia was accused of three offences against love. First, he insulted his mistress’s beloved pooch Jewel. Second, he stank mightily of garlic, which made kissing him unpleasant. And, third, he turned innocent words into wanton wordplay. As it says in his indictment:

And moreover, thou art farther indicted for that thou in the first of the Dog days after Midsommer Moon was then lately passed, in the heat of thy brain, in the first year aforesaid, in Ram-Alley in the County aforesaid, in a certain house at the sign of the Daw, didst wrest, turn, pervert, misconster, and Catachrestically abuse the honest, civil, chast, pure and incorrupt meaning of divers words following, As Standing, Members, Dealing, Trunchion, Quiver, Evidences, Weapons, Lapland, Vicegerent, and suchlike, into a wicked, wanton, lascivious and leud sense.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The best account of these revels is still P. J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston and the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in His Social Setting*, Cambridge MA, 1969, pp. 45–63. Most of the visual and oratorical displays were scripted, and, in the case of the 1597/8 revels, some of these scripts have survived. They were published by the printer William Leak, who entitled the collection *The Prince d’Amour, or the Prince of Love: With a Collection of Several Ingenious Poems and Songs By the Wits of the Age*, London, 1660. Despite the late publication date, the printed collection is a reliable, if incomplete, collection of scripts used during the Middle Temple Christmas revels of 1597/8; see Finkelpearl, *John Marston*, p. 48, n.10; H. H. Hudson’s introduction to ‘The Fustian Answer’ in J. Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style [1599]*, ed. H. H. Hudson, Princeton NJ, 1935, pp. 108–13 (108–9); *Memories of Sir Benjamin Rudyerd, Knt.*, ed. J. A. Manning, London, 1891, pp. 9–18.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Le Prince d’Amour alias Noctes Templariae’, in *Records of Early English Drama: Inns of Court*, ed. A. H. Nelson and J. R. Elliott Jr, II: *Appendixes*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 436–85 (464–5).

The setting of this crime is as important as the crime itself. Bestia's abuse of language took place in Ram Alley, the very same locale after which Barry later named his play. As the placeography of *The Early Modern Map of London* informs us, this street claimed right of sanctuary and was thus able to offer refuge to debtors, prostitutes, illegal aliens and other undesirables in London.<sup>11</sup> Men and women who needed to make a swift escape from the city authorities could duck into the Mitre Inn on Fleet Street and run out by the back door into the freedom of Ram Alley. It was less than a five-minute walk away from the Middle Temple and other Inns of Court, and deeply familiar to the law students who mingled with the criminal element there when they patronized the infamous Maidenhead Pub or brought their dirty linen to the local 'laundresses'.<sup>12</sup> As it happens, the Whitefriars playhouse was part of the same neighbourhood. An Innsman taking a stroll from the Middle Temple, through Ram Alley to the Whitefriars theatre would cover a total distance of less than 500 meters.<sup>13</sup>

But Ram Alley is more than just a fitting backdrop for Carolus Asinius Bestia's crime. The prosecutor explains to the jury:

This man, out of his mouth before he had used those ambiguous termes expressed in the Indictment, not in Gracious Street, that there might have been some grace in it, nor in Mincing-lane, that there might have been modesty in it, but in Ram Alley, a place defamed a thousand and odd hundred years past by Persius, Ut Ramale vetus vegrandi subere coctum.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For the contemporary reputation of Ram Alley, see J. Watson, 'Ram Alley', *The Map of Early Modern London*, retrieved 29 July 2019 from <http://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/RAMA1.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Laundresses were associated with prostitution in medieval and early modern England (R. M. Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England*, Oxford, 1996, pp. 54–5). In Barry's play, the lawyer Throat asks, 'Come you to seeke a Virgin in Ram-alley, So neere an Inne of Court, and amongst Cooks, Ale-men and Landresses, why[,] are you fools?': Lording Barry, *Ram-Alley, or Merrie-Trickes*, London, 1611, sig. E4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Watson, 'Ram Alley' (n. 2 above), imagines just such a stroll.

<sup>14</sup> 'Le Prince d'Amour' (n. 10 above), p. 477.

Gracious Street and Mincing Lane, like Ram Alley, are real streets of early modern London. In this passage, however, they are being invested with an allegorical power to influence people who wander into them – not too different from John Bunyan’s Vanity Fair or the Slough of Despond. Their relationship to language is obvious: people who wander into Gracious Street speak graciously, and those who find themselves in Mincing Lane mince their words. But what is the link between Ram Alley and sexual innuendo? The prosecutor relies on the fact that the street name ‘Ram Alley’ is an English homophone of the Latin noun *ramale*, which translates as ‘twig’ or ‘branch’.<sup>15</sup> The connection to the mock trial is that this Latin noun, in its context in Persius’s first satire, is a victim of exactly the same abuse for which Carolus Asinius Bestia is on trial. Just as Bestia forced the chaste words ‘standing’, ‘member’ or ‘lapland’ to carry sexual secondary meanings, so Persius had turned a harmless ‘branch’ into a metaphorical phallus.<sup>16</sup> The prosecutor’s pun is made possible by the bilingual homophone, but the real clincher is Persius’s *double entendre* in this specific line. The link between the street name and sexual punning is therefore that Ram Alley, via its Latin homophone in Persius’s first satire, is in itself a sexual pun. In this way, the Roman satirist becomes a prophet of the lewd linguistic habits of those fellow urbanites who would, in a far distant future, frequent the most notorious sinkhole of their own Troynovant.

Lording Barry, who wrote for an audience consisting largely of Innsmen, picked up on this joke and fashioned a title that neatly balances two bilingual puns, Ram Alley/*ramale* and Merry Tricks/*meretrix*. The main title, as we are now able to appreciate, presents a particularly clever, intertextual example of a Whitefriars pun. In plain English, ‘Ram Alley’

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<sup>15</sup> The connections between Ram Alley, *ramale* and Persius 1.97 are strengthened by the fact that *ramale*, in the grammatical form required for the homophone with Ram Alley, occurs only once in classical antiquity, at Persius 1.97. Its only other occurrence before 600 is at Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* 1.7; see ‘*rāmālis*’, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (TLL) Online, retrieved 18 November 2019, from [https://www.degruyter.com/view/TLL/11-2/11\\_2\\_1\\_11\\_2\\_1\\_ramalis\\_fv\\_19012013.xml](https://www.degruyter.com/view/TLL/11-2/11_2_1_11_2_1_ramalis_fv_19012013.xml).

<sup>16</sup> For the closely related *ramus* as a sexual metaphor, see J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, London, 1982, pp. 28–9.

is a metaphorical vagina; in Persius's Latin, *ramale* is a metaphorical phallus. Thus the single signifier 'Ram Alley' refers simultaneously to the male and female 'bit'. For a theatre historian, these two words offer a glimpse into a past theatrical world: they show links between the amateur performances of the Innsmen and professional performances they paid for at the Whitefriars, between Roman satire and English comedy, between high and low culture, and between the law students, criminals, whores and creatives that shared this vibrant neighbourhood in early seventeenth-century London.

For me, however, the law students' citation game poses the question: what made this puzzling and difficult line of Latin so readily available for fooling around with? Why did it come so 'trippingly on the tongue'? Persius was widely read in early modern England. He possessed great moral authority as a satirist, Stoic, and proto-Christian, and was read extensively in schools.<sup>17</sup> What is more, the Innsmen of the 1590s were avid readers and often writers of satire – the satirists John Donne, Everard Guilpin, Ben Jonson and John Marston were all students at or had close ties with the Inns of Court. We can therefore assume that Innsmen, both at the Middle Temple Revels and the Whitefriars playhouse, formed an auditorium better versed in Persius than the average. But, as it turns out, this line *was* special and on people's minds for other reasons.

## II. Persius 1.97 and Virgil's Epic Style

In the following, main part of this article, I shall show, first, that Persius 1.97 provoked early modern commentators to express their critical opinions about Virgil's epic style. And second, that this line invited them to compare (not contrast) Persius and Virgil. Stylistically, these two authors were normally considered to be worlds apart. Julius Caesar Scaliger's judgement

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<sup>17</sup> On Persius's reputation in early modern England, see, e.g., S. Gillespie, 'Imperial Satire in the English Renaissance', in *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal*, ed. S. Braund and J. Osgood, Oxford, 2012, pp. 386–408 (391–2), with further reading.

in his *Poetices libri septem* can illustrate just how vast the difference between them was. For Scaliger, Virgil brought the art of poetry through his superior artistic judgement to the highest summit of perfection. Persius, in contrast, is so harsh and wilfully obscure that Scaliger declares him ‘ineptus’ and wastes not another word on him.<sup>18</sup> Jack Daw, a character in Ben Jonson’s *Epicene*, spoke for many when he pronounced that Persius was ‘a crabbed coxcomb, not to be endured’.<sup>19</sup> And yet, as the critical history of Persius 1.97 will show us, from a certain point of view, these two supposedly antithetical stylists actually had a lot in common.

## II.1. Persius 1.97 and Virgil’s Epic Style in the Context of Modern Criticism

Persius’s first, programmatic satire is a deliciously shocking poem that is deeply concerned with literary criticism.<sup>20</sup> It thinks especially hard about the relationship between poetic style and morality, and it does so without pulling any punches. The most famous passage of the poem, Persius’s description of a fashionable poetry recital, can serve as an introduction:

Scribimus inclusi, numeros ille, hic pede liber,  
grande aliquid quod pulmo animae praelargus anhelet.  
scilicet haec populo pexusque togaque recenti

<sup>18</sup> Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem: Sieben Bücher über die Dichtkunst*, ed. L. Deitz and G. Vogt-Spira, 6 vols, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1994–2011, V: *Buch 6 und 7*, 2003, pp. 272–3: ‘Persii vero stilus morosus, et ille ineptus. ... Illum igitur mittamus.’ On Scaliger’s substantial influence in England, see L. Deitz and G. Vogt-Spira, ‘Einführung’, *ibid.*, I: *Buch 1 und 2*, pp. xi–lxxiv (particularly the section on England, pp. xxxvi–xlii), and M. Hetherington, ‘Disciplining Creativity: Habit, System, and the Logic of Late Sixteenth-Century Poetics’, *Parergon*, 33, 2016, pp. 44–66 (55).

<sup>19</sup> Ben Jonson, ‘Epicene’, ed. D. Bevington, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. D. Bevington et al., 7 vols, Cambridge, 2011–2012, III: *1606–1611*, pp. 373–516 (417) [II.3.65].

<sup>20</sup> In what follows, I have drawn on J. C. Bramble, *Persius and the Programmatic Satire: A Study in Form and Imagery*, Cambridge, 1974; Aulus Persius Flaccus, *Satiren*, ed. W. Kißel, Heidelberg, 1990; E. Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*, Oxford, 1993; E. Gowers, ‘The Decoction of Nero’, in *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History & Representation*, ed. J. Elsner and J. Masters, London, 1994, pp. 131–50; K. Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal*, Cambridge, 2001; Juvenal and Persius, ed. Braund (n. 1 above); K. Freudenburg, ‘Faking It in Nero’s Orgasmatron: Persius 1 and the Death of Criticism’, in *Juvenal and Persius*, ed. M. Plaza, Oxford, 2009, pp. 199–221; P. A. Miller, ‘Imperial Satire as Saturnalia’, in *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal*, ed. S. Braund and J. Osgood, Oxford, 2012, pp. 312–33; and S. Bartsch, *Persius: A Study in Food, Philosophy, and the Figural*, Chicago IL, 2015.



et natalicia tandem cum sardonyche albus  
sede leges celsa, liquido cum plasmate guttur  
mobile conlueris, patranti fractus ocello.  
tunc neque more probo videas nec voce serena  
ingentis trepidare Titos, cum carmina lumbum  
intran et tremulo scalpuntur ubi intima versu. (1.13–21)

[We shut ourselves away and write some grand stuff, one in verse, another in prose, stuff which only a generous lung of breath can gasp out. And of course that's what you will finally read to the public from your seat on the platform, neatly combed in your fresh toga, all dressed in white and wearing your birthday ring of sardonyx, after you have rinsed your supple throat with a liquid warble, in a state of enervation with your orgasmic eye. Then, as the poetry enters their backsides and as their inmost parts are tickled by verse vibrations, you can see huge Tituses quivering, both their respectable manner and their calm voice gone.]

In this passage, and elsewhere in the poem, Persius allows the language of literary criticism and moral satire to blend into a single idiom that simultaneously chastises bad living and bad poetry. As John Bramble has taught us in his seminal study *Persius and the Programmatic Satire*, Persius based this rhetorical strategy on Seneca the Younger's 114th Epistle and created it by reviving dead metaphors habitually found in manuals of rhetoric. Bramble explains that in the first satire:

Actual effeminacy now corresponds to stylistic effeminacy; gluttony to turgidity;  
over-meticulous dress to fussy ornament in style; disease and distortion to disfigured

composition. From the theoretical principle, *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita* [‘men’s speech is just like their life’], and its ramifications in literary-critical terminology, Persius creates a class of images which refer simultaneously to life and letters.<sup>21</sup>

The reigning vice in this particular scene is *mollitia*, effeminacy, which is detectable in the poet’s dress, the ornamental style of his verses, his lubricated, softly modulated voice, and especially the readiness with which the beefy Romans in the audience become *cinaedi*, that is, men who passively submit to anal penetration.<sup>22</sup>

Persius pushes the contradictions between the poet’s effeminacy and his ability to enter his auditors’ bodies through his verse into the (frustrated) climax of the poetry recital:

tun, vetule, auriculis alienis colligis escas,  
articulis quibus et dicas cute perditus ‘ohe’?  
‘quo didicisse, nisi hoc fermentum et quae semel intus  
innata est rupto iecore exierit caprificus?’ (1.22–5)

[Dirty old man, cooking erotica for other men’s ears,  
passive, demanding, which your gouty impotence can no longer please.  
‘What’s the point of study if that frothy yeast, that fig-tree  
which has once struck root inside never exits, liver burst?’]<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bramble, *Persius* (n. 20 above), p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> For a systematic scheme of Roman sexual terms, see H. N. Parker, ‘The Teratogenic Grid’, in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner, Princeton NJ, 1997, pp. 47–65. On *mollitia*, see C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 63–97.

<sup>23</sup> In this instance, text and translation are taken from Bramble, *Persius* (n. 20 above), pp. 205 and 209.

The reciting poet may be old and weak, but he has powerful sexual urges. Underneath his white toga, the diseased profligate has a painful erection that will not achieve orgasm: neither the fig tree nor the froth ('fermentum') will find release. And even if they did, the *caprificus* is sterile. The passage thus concludes in a tree metaphor that stands for an old, infertile penis with decayed foreskin ('cute perditus'),<sup>24</sup> which in turn stands for feeble, debased, and corrupting poetic output. The metaphor works on three levels. The literal meaning is a tree, but on top of that are not one but two levels of transferred meaning. One relates to sexual morality, the other to writing style. Yet separating them out is to create an artificial distinction, because one area of life always reflects the other. The branch simile that fills line 1.97 functions in the same way. It too touches upon poetic and phallic (dis)ability. But it presents a further range of interpretative challenges.

Ancient poetry does not come with punctuation marks.<sup>25</sup> In a conversation between different speakers, it is tricky to decide who says what. Persius's first satire is an extreme case. It might well represent a conversation, but it ultimately frustrates efforts to assign the speaking parts because it takes place between Persius's persona and a projection of his own mind conjured up for the sole purpose of speaking the adversary's part. Is this a dialogue, or, as Emily Gowers has it, 'a pool of voices, or one split and undecided one, speaking to thin air?'<sup>26</sup> Modern critics revel in this feature of Persius's satires and celebrate the resulting un-inevitability (a word I snatch from Kirk Freudenburg).<sup>27</sup> But editors of Persius have always been forced to make decisions, to punctuate and to distribute the lines neatly between 'Persius' and his 'interlocutor'. The passage surrounding 'ut ramale vetus' in particular has

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<sup>24</sup> I follow Bramble's take on 'cute perditus' as 'with ruined prepuce' in his *Persius* (n. 20 above), p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> For the interpretative potential of this absence, see D. Feeney, 'Hic finis fandi: On the Absence of Punctuation for the Endings (and Beginnings) of Speeches in Latin Poetic Texts', *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*, 66, 2011, pp. 45–91.

<sup>26</sup> Gowers, 'Persius and the Decoction of Nero' (n. 20 above), p. 192.

<sup>27</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome* (n. 20 above), p. 126, calls Persius's satires 'the most exotic and un-inevitable of all Latin poetry books'.

proven so tricky that it taxed the assiduity even of Victorian editors: ‘The difficulties that have been raised about every part of these verses (92–7) are so many that it would be tedious to follow them’, wrote the Reverend Arthur John Maclean, waving the white flag of scholarly surrender from his study window in Trinity College, Cambridge.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, since the twentieth century, a consensus has emerged among editors. This could be illustrated with any number of editions, including Walter Kißel’s magisterial work, but I will use the more readily available Loeb edition prepared by Susanna Braund to exemplify today’s standard approach to lines 92–7.<sup>29</sup> (Braund makes speech attributions by adding the capitals ‘I’ and ‘P’ into the margins of her English translation.)

[Interlocutor:] ‘sed numeris decor est et iunctura addita crudis.

cludere sic versum didicit “Berecynthius Attis”

et “qui caeruleum dirimebat Nerea delphin,”

sic “costam longo subduximus Appennino.”

“Arma virum,” nonne hoc spumosum et cortice pingui

ut ramale vetus vegrandi subere coctum?’ (1.92–7)

[I[nterlocutor:] ‘But elegance and smoothness have been added to the raw rhythms of old poetry. That’s how “Berecynthian Attis” learned how to end the line, and “The dolphin parting azure Nereus”, and “We stole a rib from the long Apennines” too.

<sup>28</sup> A. J. Maclean, *Juvenalis et Persii Satirae*, 2nd rev. ed., London, 1867, p. 384.

<sup>29</sup> For examples of other modern European and North American editors who give 92–7 entirely to the interlocutor, see C. F. Heinrich, *Des Aulus Persius Flaccus Satiren berichtet und erklärt*, Leipzig, 1844; Persius, *Satirae*, ed. G. Némethy, Budapest, 1903; id., *Saturarum liber*, ed. W. V. Clausen, Oxford, 1956; id., *Saturae*, ed. N. Scivoletto, Florence, 1956; R. A. Harvey, *A Commentary on Persius*, Leiden, 1981; Persius, *The Satires* ... , ed. and transl. G. Lee and W. Barr, Wolfboro NH, 1987; id., *Satiren*, ed. Kißel (n. 20 above). For the now rejected nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tradition to give 96–7 to Persius and read ‘arma virum’ as an exclamation along the lines of ‘by the shade of Virgil!’, see J. C. Friedrich Meister, *Über Persius Satire I V[ers] 92–106*, Frankfurt a. d. Oder, 1801, pp. 21–9; Persius, *Satirarum liber*, ed. O. Jahn, Leipzig, 1843; id., *The Satires* ..., ed. and transl., 2nd rev. ed. by H. Nettleship, Oxford, 1874; and Juvenal and Persius, ed. and transl. G. G. Ramsey, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1918.

“Arms and the man!” Isn’t this frothy stuff, with a thick crust, like an ancient dried-up branch with swollen bark?’]

The interlocutor thus speaks the entire passage in defence of the Neronian epic poetry he loves. He contends that, at the very least, Neronian epics are no longer as rough and technically unsophisticated as the old ones were. Instead, the new Neronian epics display an admirable metrical fluency. He offers quotations in support of his claim of recently achieved elegance. ‘Arma virum’ continues his patchwork of citations, but of course this time, it is not a line ending from a Neronian poem, but the beginning of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

If the poem is edited like this, the interlocutor quotes the *Aeneid* and does so with derision. Lines 1.96–7 combine into withering disapproval: Virgil’s epic is outmoded fustian. In this context and within the metaphoric triangle of plants, pricks and epic poetry, the desiccated branch with the swollen, puffy bark is an insult that cuts to the quick of Virgil’s style *and* manhood. If the reader feels that Virgil is being wronged here, he or she receives satisfaction only from the knowledge that the interlocutor functions as a mouthpiece for bad taste. Persius himself, in this version of events, ignores the attack on the *Aeneid* and blithely continues his satire against effete modern verse. If at all, his more positive opinion of Virgil’s stylistic and sexual powers can only be inferred indirectly when, moments later in lines 1.104–5, he asks ‘haec fierent si testiculi vena ulla paterni / viveret in nobis?’ (‘would such things [i.e., such bad poems] happen if any pulse at all of our fathers’ balls still lived in us?’).

Modern classicists thus give us a coherent and plausible account of this section of the poem. But other solutions are possible, even some that would transform line 1.97 from insult to exultant praise. For one thing, the cork tree in 1.97 is not as straightforwardly negative as the earlier fig that sprouted from the debauched poet’s loins. In the world of Roman sexual *mores*, as Catharine Edwards has expressed it, ‘Virtue is noble, dry and hard – sunburnt, with

roughened hands'.<sup>30</sup> Virgil's *ramale vetus* is all of these positively connoted things: dry, hard, sunburnt and rough. Furthermore, if, for the interlocutor, the stylistic vice of the old poets was rawness ('crudis', 1.92), then it seems like a contradiction to accuse Virgil's verses of being literally the opposite: they are cooked ('coctum', 1.97). Also, the adjective 'vegrandi' (1.96), which is a variant usually accepted instead of the alternative 'praegrandi', can be taken to mean 'very small' instead of 'very large', which would immediately remedy the ominous swelling of the bark/foreskin/verbal style.<sup>31</sup> As long as we assume that the line is the interlocutor's rude affront, these aspects of the simile remain inactive. But if we were convinced that the line is spoken by Persius in praise of Virgil and his *Aeneid*, they would suddenly come to the fore. And this is the situation we find in early modern editions of Virgil.

## II.2. Persius 1.97 and Virgil's Epic Style in the Context of Early Modern Criticism

Many influential scholars all over Europe – such as the Flemish grammarian Josse Bade, the Dutch humanist Johannes Murmellius, the German professor Eilhard Lubin (whose edition of Persius was owned by Ben Jonson) and one of the greatest classicists of the Northern Renaissance, the Frenchman Isaac Casaubon – did not allow Persius just to stand by while Virgil was being insulted. In their editions of the poem, they favoured a different punctuation of 1.92–7. (I have supplied speech attributions in brackets based on the paraphrase, scholia, and commentaries in this edition.)

[Persius:]      Sed numeris decor est & iunctura abdita crudis.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, *Politics of Immorality* (n. 22 above), p. 174.

<sup>31</sup> A. E. Housman's discussion of the meaning of 'vegrandi' in Cicero, *De lege agraria*, II.93 ('uegrandi macie torridum', 'parched with puny spareness') is relevant for the following discussion of smallness through diminution through the sun's heat: 'Ciceroniana', in A. E. Housman, *The Classical Papers ...*, ed. J. Diggle and F. R. D. Goodyear, II: 1897–1914, Cambridge, 1972, pp. 873–9.

Claudere sic didicit versum, berecynthus Atys,

Et qui caeruleum dirimebat Nerea delphin.

Sic costam longo subduximus Appoenino.

[Interlocutor:] Arma viru[m], no[n]ne hoc spumosum & cortice pingui?

[Persius:] Vt ramale uetus uegrandi subere coctum.<sup>32</sup>

In this scenario, Persius, not the interlocutor, speaks 1.92–5. Consequently, these four lines now drip with irony as they mock the precious inanity of Neronian epic. The following verse, 1.96, is explained as a question posed by the interlocutor, who intercedes on behalf of his contemporaries by drawing a comparison between them and the undeniably admirable *Aeneid*. The question could be paraphrased as: ‘Persius, you attack these Neronian works for their wordy bombast, but is the great Virgil’s epic not equally bombastic?’ Line 1.97, finally, is isolated and presents Persius’s answer.

Editing the passage like this maximizes its critical significance for a Renaissance audience because it turns it into a brief question-and-answer exploration of Virgil’s epic style. This was an important matter in the Renaissance. As David Scott Wilson-Okamura explains: ‘Virgil was used as a standard textbook, not just for poetry but also for morality; in classrooms the world over, he was offered to students as a formal model (*norma loquendi*) and as a moral guide (*norma vivendi*).’<sup>33</sup> The gist of the lesson was that a great man like Virgil, in both life and letters, showed restraint. In composition, he was reputed to have been a careful writer, who spent a long time refining his initial output into minimalist perfection. According to the *Life* of Donatus, Virgil

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<sup>32</sup> Juvenal and Persius, *Satyrae cum doctissimorum uirorum commentariis atq[ue] annotationibus, omnium quorum in hu[n]c diem aliquid editum extat, quorum nomina uersa pagina declarabit*, Basel, 1551, p. 402. This edition includes the commentaries of Jodocus Badius Ascensius, Johannes Britannicus Brixianus, Johannes Baptista Plautius, Aelius Antonius Nebrissensis, and Johannes Murmellius Ruremondensis.

<sup>33</sup> D. S. Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil in the Renaissance*, Cambridge, 2010, p. 103.

would dictate every day a great number of verses that he had thought out in the morning and that he would, in revising them throughout the day, reduce them to a very small number, saying not unreasonably that he brought his poem into being in a fashion not unlike a she-bear's and that then he licked it into shape.<sup>34</sup>

Renaissance humanists argued that, as a result of this labour, Virgil managed not only to refine his own poetry, but with it the entirety of Latin literature, which, before his day, had been rough and unsophisticated. In their eyes, this writerly fastidiousness was the literary expression of his moral purity. Virgil was 'so upright, in both word and thought', Donatus tells us, 'that he was commonly known as Parthenias [the Maiden] in Naples'.<sup>35</sup>

Understanding, imitating, and teaching his style thus went straight to the heart of the literary and pedagogical project of Renaissance humanism. This discourse slots in easily with Persius's first satire, because both are based on the premise that 'Style is the Man'. No special adjustments are necessary to allow Persius's satiric blend of literary criticism and manners to crystallize, for a moment, into a judgement on Virgil, the man, and the *Aeneid*, his epic.

This background gives us a fair idea of how strong the contrast between the Neronian poets and Virgil must have been for a Renaissance reader. Persius's portrait of the lecherous reciter buggering burly Romans with his puffed-up verses is the antithesis of abstemious Virgil. So are the vain poetasters who end their hexameters with 'Berecyntius Attis', or 'qui caeruleum dirimebat Nerea delphin', or 'sic costam longo subduximus Appennino' – a sequence that performs the unthinking ease with which empty words inflate into epic poetry.

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<sup>34</sup> Donatus, 'Vita Suetonii Vulgo Donatiana', in *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, ed. J. M. Ziolkowski and M. C. J. Putnam, New Haven CT, 2008, pp. 181–99 (184 and 192).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183 and 190.



For the average Renaissance reader, the interlocutor's suggestion that Virgil is just as frothy as the authors of these lines was outrageous. Persius, himself a model of moral living, *had* to put the record straight. And his early modern editors made sure that he did. In fact, they embraced wholeheartedly the challenge of explaining what it might mean to say that the *Aeneid* is like an old, dried-up branch with a bark of an uncertain thickness.

Some commentators felt that Persius was simply being ironic. This was the opinion, for example, of the French rhetorician Antoine Foquelin, the Italian scholar Filippo Valentino and the German poet and ousted professor Philip Nicodemus Frischlin. Foquelin paraphrases in his commentary, 'imo vero (ait Persius) non magis turgidum & inflatum est Virgilij poema, quam ramale vetus diuturno Solis calore exiccatum' ('You nailed it', says Persius, 'Virgil's poem is about as turgid and inflated as an old branch that has been dried out through long exposure to the heat of the sun').<sup>36</sup> Valentino makes the same point with more gusto, employing several parallel examples from the Italian vernacular to elucidate Persius's use of irony:

Per ironiam interponit [Persius] ita pingue esse, ut ramale vetus. ... sicut nos proverbialiter dicimus per ironiam: '*Netto come un baston da pollar, chiaro come brodi di ceci, & melius grasso come una sadella salata, O un luccio secco al fumo.*'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Persius, *Satyræ sex a Nicodemo Frischlino Alemanno ex vetustiss. Codicis fide paraphrasi illustratæ: Valentini insuper, Volsci, Engentini, & Foquellini Comentarijs explicatae*, Basel, 1582, p. 52. Pagination begins afresh for each of the three sections: Frischlin's paraphrases (1–95), Valentini's, Volsci's and Engentius's commentaries (1–198 followed by the unpaginated sig. ω1–4) and finally Foquelin's commentary (1–232). I am here referring to the third section. My translation; note that 'imo vero' is ironic in this case.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 35. I am here referring to the second section; pagination is faulty and p. 35 appears twice. My translation.

[Persius] suggests ironically that it is swollen like an old branch. ... this is just as when we say proverbially through irony that something is *neat as a chicken coop*, *clear as chickpea soup* or, even better, *fat like a salted sardine or a smoked pike*.

An English example would be ‘clear as mud’. The irony-hypothesis thus makes short shrift of the interlocutor’s question. Satisfying as this may be (and saying that the *Aeneid* is somehow *like a salted sardine* is just delightful), other scholars got considerably more critical mileage out of the line.

Take, for example, Isaac Casaubon. His extensive commentary on lines 1.96–7 puts forward an explanation why this debate is conducted in terms of branches and their barks, and what exactly Persius thinks of Virgil’s epic style. Casaubon first establishes that the *Aeneid* in general and its first two words in particular are sublime (ὕψηλή) both in matter and words. Moreover, the beginning of the *Aeneid* sounds so manly, you can feel its virility roll over your tongue:

Iam si verba spectes, illud insigne quod tantum opus auspicatus est a voce quae & incipit & desinit in vocalissima omnium vocalium, ARMA. literam vero R quam multi refugiunt ut caninam, quis non videt virilem facere pronuntiationem, sublata omni mollitie?<sup>38</sup>

[If you go on to look at vocabulary, it is striking that he opened the great work with a word that both starts and ends with the most sonorous of all vowels, ARMA. Who

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<sup>38</sup> Persius, *Satirarum liber*, Isaacus Casaubonus recensuit & commentario libro illustravit, Paris, 1605, p. 138. My translation.

does not see that the letter R, which many avoid as snarling, makes for a masculine pronunciation, all softness having been removed?]

Alas, the Neronians did not see this. They, as well as Persius's adversary, says Casaubon, are too stupid ('tanta stultitia') and morally too corrupted to grasp true greatness.<sup>39</sup> By describing the *Aeneid* as 'spumosum et cortice pingui', the adversary actually tries to capture its magnificence. He wants to say something good about the *Aeneid*, but instead he betrays his misguided assumption that the best epic style consists in bombast. For Casaubon, 'spumosum' ('frothy') and 'cortice pingui' ('of a thick bark') are Latin equivalents of the Greek term φλοιώδης, which literally means 'like rind' and metaphorically 'frothy', 'showy', 'superficial'. Casaubon demonstrates the relevance of this term by quoting a fitting passage from *On the Sublime*, where Longinus criticizes Clitarchus's turgid phrases: 'φλοιώδης γὰρ ἄνθρωπος καὶ φυσῶν κατὰ τὸν Σοφοκλέα "μικροῖς μὲν ἀυλίσκοισι, φορβειᾶς δ' ἄτερ"' ('an affected creature, blowing, as Sophocles says, "on scrannel pipes, yet wasting all his wind"').<sup>40</sup> Thickness, Casaubon is careful to point out, is negative in this case and synonymous with 'παχύς' or 'crassus' ('thick'), both of which range in meaning from dull solidity to coarse stupidity. In today's colloquial English, 'thick' or 'dense' (of persons slow of apprehension) is a good equivalent.

When, in the following verse 1.97, Persius continues the branch-and-bark metaphor of his adversary, Casaubon gives us to understand that Persius only *seems* to agree with his opponent, when in fact he subtly adjusts the stylistic vocabulary so that it describes the *Aeneid* correctly:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 3.2., cited here from the Loeb edition of Aristotle, *Poetics*, Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Demetrius, *On Style*, ed. and transl. S. Halliwell, D. Russell and D. C. Innes, Cambridge MA, 1995, pp. 168–9.

*Vt ramale vetus vaegrandi subere coctum.*) Responsio Persij allegorica: metaphoram enim continuat qua vsus fuerat qui dixerat Virgilij poëmata esse cortice pingui.

assentitur Persius, crassum corticem, hoc est τὸ ὑψηλόν, habere Maronis scripta: sed tumorem vanum illis negat inesse. sublimitatem ostendit operum Virgilij, comparans illa cum arbore grandis corticis: at sublimitatem illam castigatam esse, & veram, non speciem solum inanem, indicat, comparans eius scripta non cum quauis arbore μεγαλοφλοίῳ: verum cum illa arbore siue ramo, qui natura quidem magni sit corticis, sed quem longa dies & Solis radij siccauerint, multumque imminuerint.<sup>41</sup>

[The response of Persius is allegorical, for he continues the metaphor that the person who had said that Virgil's poems have a fat bark [*cortice pingui*] had used. Persius agrees that the writings of Maro have a solid bark [*crassum corticem*], that is to say, τὸ ὑψηλόν [sublimity]; but he denies that there is empty swelling in them. He displays the sublimity of the works of Virgil, comparing them to a tree with magnificent bark [*grandis corticis*]; but the sublimity is restrained and true and not merely an empty exterior, he says, comparing his works not to any tree with a thick bark [*μεγαλοφλοίῳ*], but rather to that tree or branch which by nature has great bark [*magni ... corticis*] but which the length of time and the rays of the sun have dried up, and much reduced.]

Casaubon observes that there is a sense of proportion and propriety about Virgil's epic style. Just as a cork tree naturally has a thick bark, Virgil's poem possesses the degree of grandeur appropriate for its kind. He then picks up on the words 'vetus' and 'coctum'. Casaubon transforms the old age and dryness of the branch into an allegory of Virgil's method of

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<sup>41</sup> Persius, *Satirarum liber*, ed. Casaubon (n. 38 above), p. 138–9. My translation.

composition, that is, of his habit of spending a long time whittling down and refining his initial output. Virgil acts upon his poem as the sun acts upon the bark of a tree when its heat, over time, dehydrates and shrivels the bark. Casaubon thus describes a preliminary, perfect correspondence between *res* and *verba* that is subsequently revised into a more complex relationship between the expansive, grand subject of the poem and its reduced, taut language.

Casaubon mimics this process in his vocabulary, imitating Virgil's method of reduction in his own language. Having corrected the excessive 'pingui' and 'crassum' to the accurate term for the high style, 'grande', he finally arrives at the humbler adjectives 'μέγας' and 'magnus'. By now, magnitude is redefined. It is not a lesser version of the grand style, but its concentrated essence. Virgil's magnitude is greater than grandeur. Casaubon's reduction of vocabulary down to the Virgilian word 'magnus' aligns his own critical writing with Virgil's poetry, as if to flaunt a special affinity between the great poet and his great critic. Both are able to produce, through a long and arduous process, a word that combines utter simplicity with excessive meaningfulness. Casaubon's language also reflects the close connection between Virgil's life and letters. To write like this requires discipline. The *Aeneid* possesses 'sublimitatem ... castigatam', literally, a chastised sublimity. For Casaubon, then, 1.97 is a little branch-and-bark allegory that pays tribute to Virgil's minimalist style *and* his manly restraint.

A supremely disciplined man and writer himself, Casaubon might well have considered restraint to be Virgil's chief virtue. But for many other humanists, this characteristic was only the first step towards understanding how the *Aeneid* works its magic. As Wilson-Okamura has shown, for scholars such as Macrobius, Erasmus and Tasso, Virgil's compressed language was the key to the *Aeneid*'s superabundance of meaning: a line as sparse as 'et campos ubi troia fuit' ('and the fields where Troy was', *Aeneid*, III.11) packs the glory, fall and disappearance of the splendid city into five simple words. Tasso called this

Virgil's *pienezza*, his fullness.<sup>42</sup> This notion is behind the grammarian Josse Bade's paraphrase of line 1.97: 'respondet poeta, est quide[m] ut ramale uetus, quasi diceret, non turgidum aut inflatum, sed solidum & suo succo plenum' ('Our poet answers: the *Aeneid* is like an old branch, that is as if to say, it is not swollen and inflated, but compact and full of sap').<sup>43</sup> This combination of age, density and lusciousness works because of the common assumption that Virgil's long labour produced a compressed style that made the *Aeneid* intensely meaningful. In Bade's highly influential opinion, then, Virgil's *ramale vetus* was bursting with juiciness.

### II.3. Virgilius Decoctus?

The critics I have discussed so far have employed a variety of critical reading strategies that made line 1.97 conform to standard early modern critical assumptions about Virgil's epic style. They edited for maximum impact and had Persius shout their own love of Virgil from the rooftops. One might argue that the reception of 1.97 in Neo-Latin commentaries is a test case for critical ideology, for what can and cannot be said about Virgil in this culture and this critical genre. But Persius himself had a stake in this stylistic game and at least one of his early modern students, Johannes Murmellius, not only noticed that, but was encouraged to push the conventions regarding Virgil to such an unorthodox extreme that the prince of poets begins to sound like Persius himself.

Murmellius's popular commentary was first published in 1517 and reprinted at least nineteen times during the sixteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil* (n. 33 above), p. 135.

<sup>43</sup> Juvenal and Persius, *Satyrae* 1551 (n. 32 above), p. 402. My translation.

<sup>44</sup> See the bibliographies in D. Reichling, *Johannes Murmellius: Sein Leben und Werk*, Nieuwkoop, 1963, pp. 159–61 [reprint of the edition Freiburg, 1880], and M. H. Morgan, *A Bibliography of Persius*, Cambridge MA, 1909.

Spumosum carmen dicitur, quod uerbis sonoris, aut mollibus compositum extrinsecus intumescit, set intus non habet uerum uigorem. ... Est aute[m] ueteris rami cortex minus tumidus quam recentis, & solis calore consumptis superfluis humoribus, decoctus, et maturatus. Sic & Vergilii carmina no[n] sunt spumosa, neq[ue] turgida, sed intus succule[n]ta & paruo quidem, sed firmo cortice maturata. Vergilius enim non effudit multa simul carmina, sed pauca post dilligentissimam praemediationem co[n]didit.<sup>45</sup>

[A poem is called *spumosum*, frothy, of which the surface is bloated with noisy and effeminate words, but on the inside, it has no true strength. ... But the bark of an old branch is less swollen than the bark of a new one, and by the heat of the sun which has dried up its superfluous moisture, it has been boiled-down [*decoctus*] and matured. And so, Virgil's poems are not *spumosa*, and also not swollen, but on the inside full of juice and have a small, yes, but firm and mature bark. For Virgil did not pour forth [*non effudit*] several verses at the same time, but composed small amounts after the most careful consideration.]

Murmellius's defence duly rehearses Donatus's idea of Virgil as a patient reviser of an initially more profuse output. In so far as writing is like handling water, Virgil does not gush ('non effudit') like the Neronian poets; he condenses.

The Dutch scholar stays with the idea of dehydration and homes in on the vocabulary in 1.97, where the *Aeneid* is 'coctum', 'cooked' or 'boiled'. If Murmellius had simply used Persius's word 'coctum', his interpretation would have remained within the confines of both early modern and modern standard accounts of Virgil's style, put in terms of cookery:

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<sup>45</sup> Juvenal and Persius, *Satyrae* 1551 (n. 32 above), p. 411. My translation.

through a process of reduction, the *Aeneid* achieves a rich intensity of flavour. But Murmellius does not repeat ‘coctum’. Instead, he employs the more extreme ‘decoctus’, which translates as ‘boiled down to a third of the original juices’. If writing is like cooking liquid, then the *Aeneid* is a medicinal reduction or an intensely thickened stew. Suddenly the sublime epic looks rather unappetizing. This is deliberate: Murmellius has chosen to attach to Virgil’s epic a stylistic keyword that is central to Persius’s own poetics.

As Murmellius has clearly understood, the passage 1.92–7 links in with Persius’s stylistic vocabulary in Satires 1 and 5. It establishes a contrast between the style of Persius and that of the Neronians.

Scribimus inclusi, numeros ille, hic pede liber,

**grande aliquid** quod pulmo animae praelargus anhelet. (1.13–14)

sed numeris decor est et **iunctura addita crudis**.

cludere sic versum didicit ‘Berecyntius Attis’

et ‘qui caeruleum dirimebat Nerea delphin’,

Sic ‘costam longo subduximus Appennino’.

‘Arma virum’, nonne hoc spumosum et cortice pingui

ut ramale vetus vegrandi subere **coctum**?’ (1.92–7)

...

‘Si forte **aliquid decoctius** audis’ (1.125)

verba togae sequeris **iunctura callidus acris** (5.14)



The Neronian poets' overblown vocabulary (as in 'Berecynthius Attis') and super-smooth word combinations ('iunctura') contrast with Persius's everyday words ('verba togae') thrust into harsh juxtapositions ('iunctura callidus acris'). In writing 'aliquid decoctius', Persius makes a deliberate departure from 'grande aliquid' (1.14) served up by the effete poets he despises. His effort to be different results in a difficult, astringent obscurity, a poetry, as Emily Gowers has said, 'that expects no guests'.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, this passage 1.92–7 opens a contrast between Persius's poetics and that of his Augustan predecessors.<sup>47</sup> First, there are allusions to Horace's *Ars poetica*, 46–8:

In verbis etiam tenuis cautusque serendis  
dixeris egregie, **notum si callida verbum**  
reddiderit **iunctura novum**.

[Moreover, with a nice taste and care in weaving words together, you will express yourself most happily, if a skilful setting makes a familiar word new.]<sup>48</sup>

This intertext gives definition to Persius's stylistic departure in 'verba togae sequeris iunctura callidus acris'. Horace had advocated refreshingly defamiliarizing conjunctions. Persius clearly picks up on this, but intensifies the method. He will put words at such sharp angles to each other that the result is unpleasant, bumpy and ambiguous.

<sup>46</sup> Gowers, *Loaded Table* (n. 20 above), p. 180.

<sup>47</sup> Persius's imitation of Horace's *Ars poetica* is well established; see G. C. Fiske, 'Lucilius, the *Ars Poetica* of Horace, and Persius', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 24, 1913, pp. 1–36; C. Dessen, *Iunctura Callidus Acris: A Study of Persius' Satires*, Urbana IL, 1968; and D. M. Hooley, *The Knotted Thong: Structures of Mimesis in Persius*, Ann Arbor MI, 1997, ch. 1. Unfortunately, Hooley's chapter on the first satire and its engagement with *Ars poetica* skips over 1.92–7.

<sup>48</sup> Horace, *Satires, Epistles, The Art of Poetry*, transl. H. R. Fairclough, rev. ed., Cambridge, MA, 1929, pp. 442–89 (454–5).

Furthermore, because Persius claims for himself the composition of ‘aliquid decoctius’, the word ‘coctum’ in 1.97 amounts to an invitation to compare his own style to Virgil’s. Again, Persius’s style is different from the Augustan poet, but only in degree. Murellius takes Persius’s hint, but he goes further than Persius himself. He offers us a *Virgilius decoctus*. His stylistic concatenation of Persius and Virgil might seem crazy. Based on what we know about early modern Virgil reception, Murellius is making a very bold move. And yet it is founded on the entirely conventional observation that both poets stand out for their verbal economy and compression. Wilson-Okamura’s overview of Renaissance attitudes to Virgilian style mentions only two ‘outlaws and outriders’ whose attitude differed from the mainstream opinion regarding Virgil’s brevity.<sup>49</sup> These are Lodovico Castelvetro, who thought brevity could not give rise to wonder, and Sperone Speroni, who accused Virgil of being too concerned with brevity, ‘which cannot be ornate and consequently is not pleasurable’.<sup>50</sup> Torquato Tasso, Speroni’s onetime pupil, also seems to have had moments of doubt. In a complex and cautious passage, Wilson-Okamura draws together comments from a variety of Tasso’s writings suggesting that Virgil’s brevity created mystery. According to Tasso, his poetry is like ‘sand without lime’, which Wilson-Okamura takes to mean that Virgil removes so much that ‘what remains is concentrated and powerful, but also ambiguous’.<sup>51</sup> Evidently, Tasso first viewed this as a defect in Virgil, before he decided that it contributed to his weightiness.

It is surprising that the pickings are so slim because any potential early modern detractor of Virgil could have pointed to an ancient tradition accusing Virgil of severe

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<sup>49</sup> Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil* (n. 33 above), p. 134.

<sup>50</sup> Cited *ibid.*, p. 133, from Speroni’s *Discorsi supra Virgilio* from B. Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols, Chicago IL, 1961, I, p. 170.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil* (n. 33 above), p. 138. Tasso adapts Suetonius, *Life of Caligula* 53.2, where Caligula criticizes Seneca’s prose style as ‘harena sine calce’. Caligula means that Seneca’s short, maxim-like sentences did not hang together properly, i.e., were too loosely interconnected. Wilson-Okamura, *loc. cit.*, suggests that, in Tasso’s letter, the phrase is ‘a description of what happens to verse when you remove all of the conjunctions’.

stylistic faults due to his bold combinations of everyday words. This tradition was well known to the Renaissance, because it is in Donatus's *Life of Virgil*. Donatus records the disapproving voice of one Marcus Vipsanius, who accused Virgil of 'novae cacozelia ... non tumidae nec exilis, sed ex communibus verbis atque ideo latentis' ('a new kind of affectation, neither bombastic nor overly humble, but constructed of common words and therefore not obvious').<sup>52</sup> The term 'cacozelia' is complex.<sup>53</sup> But, in light of our passage and Mummellius's response to it, Vipsanius can be understood as censoring Virgil's wilfully strange combinations of common words that lead to obscurity and even catachresis. This is certainly how it was understood by R.O.A.M. Lyne, who was one of the few modern critics of Virgil's style to explore a more difficult and obscure Virgil. In *Words and the Poet*, Lyne is convinced that 'what "M. Vipranus" critically calls "nova cacozelia ex communibus uerbis" Horace would have called "iunctura" of the "notum verbum"'.<sup>54</sup> But for Lyne, Marcus Vipranus's comment does more than record a different perspective on the same stylistic effect: the detractor has a genuine point about the greater extremity of Virgil's operations with words. Lyne stresses that 'Vergil's procedures with languages are often more extreme than Horace's. Vergil uses combinations not only as Horace does to "make a familiar word new", to freshen it, but to extort novelty of sense, to wrest from a word some quite unexpected meaning.'<sup>55</sup> Because of his poet's ungentle handling of words, Lyne adapts his own critical vocabulary and chooses 'assertive, even violent metaphors to describe [Virgil's more extreme techniques]: "distortion" and "exploitation"'.<sup>56</sup> Lyne finds that Virgil's overall

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<sup>52</sup> Donatus, 'Vita Suetonii' (n. 34 above), pp. 186 and 194.

<sup>53</sup> The most extensive discussion is H. D. Jocelyn, 'Vergilius Cacozelus (Donatus Vita Vergilii 44)', *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar*, 2, 1979, pp. 67–142; for an overview of scholarship, see N. Horsfall, 'Style, Language and Metre', in *A Companion to the Study of Virgil*, ed. N. Horsfall, Leiden, 2000, pp. 217–48 (225–6), and, more recently M. Colombo, 'La Presunta Cacozelia di Virgilio: Contributo all'esegeso di Don. Vita Verg. 44 e alla storia della critica letteraria', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, N.F., 157.3, 2014, pp. 327–56.

<sup>54</sup> R.O.A.M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet: Characteristic Techniques of Style in Vergil's Aeneid*, Oxford, 1989, p. 18, n. 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

use of ordinary words is ‘dense, teasing, often puzzling. Vergil can seem, and has seemed even in antiquity, elusive or obscure. So it seemed to M. Vipranus, if that be his name.’<sup>57</sup>

And so, I think, it seemed to Johannes Murmellius. The Renaissance humanist seized on Persius’s term *decoctus* to embrace, like Lyne, an idea of Virgil as a startling and dark stylist, whose combinations of words are as magnificently un-inevitable as Persius’s. At the very least, Murmellius adds a further, non-conformist voice to the otherwise harmonious choir of early modern critics of Virgil’s epic style. But maybe such other voices were more common than we tend to expect. Murmellius’s *Virgilius decoctus* – embedded as he was, in the midst of a popular commentary on the school author Persius – should prepare us to recognize the crabbed, hard, unpleasant Virgil when we come across him in early modern reception.

### III. Coda: Persius 1.97 and Jonson’s *Poetaster*

An awareness of Persius’s line and its reception can help us make sense of at least one prominent comment on Virgil from the English Renaissance. In Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster, or His Arraignment* (1601), Horace tries to express the idea that we have encountered so frequently in this article, that Virgil’s poetry is the product of a process of concentration. Virgil’s learning, Horace says, is not bookish,

But a direct and analytic sum  
Of all the worth and first effects of arts.  
And for his poesy, ’tis so rammed with life  
That it shall gather strength of life with being

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

And live hereafter more admired than now.<sup>58</sup>

That someone's poetry is 'so rammed with life' is a strange and evocative thing to say, and consequently critics of Virgil and of Jonson have picked up on this as an 'interesting' and 'memorable' phrase.<sup>59</sup> The usual editorial gloss 'crammed' is helpful, but does not fully explain what it is about this line that captures the imagination.<sup>60</sup> The gloss also misses a potential allusion, which the reception history of Persius 1.97 can help bring to light. Restoring the phrase's lost specificity allows us to appreciate its particular *energeia*.

Jonson was very likely to have known the mock-prosecutor's joke that Ram Alley was 'a place defamed a thousand and odd hundred years past by Persius, Ut Ramale vetus vegrandi subere coctum'.<sup>61</sup> *Poetaster*, which was published in 1601, is dedicated to Richard Martin, none other than the Prince d'Amour of the Christmas Revels of 1597/8. And when Ben Jonson wrote *Epicene* in 1609, the play in which Persius is named as 'a crabbed coxcomb not to be endured', Jonson's immediate source was the play that used the very same pun from the *Prince d'Amour* in its title: Lording Barry's *Ram Alley, or Merry Tricks*. Jonson's unusual formulation about Virgil's poetry, 'tis so rammed with life', might thus very well be written with Persius's *ramale vetus* and its sixteenth-century critical tradition in mind, especially those comments which, like Josse Badius's, explain that Virgil's compressions lead to a 'ramale' that is bursting with sap.

I would suggest that Jonson employs this evocative phrase to imitate Horace's *callida iunctura* in English, so that his Horace sounds in English as Horace would have sounded in

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<sup>58</sup> Ben Jonson, 'Poetaster, or His Arraignment', ed. G. B. Jackson, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. D. Bevington et al., 7 vols, Cambridge, 2011–12, II: 1601–1606, pp. 1–181 (137) [V.1.135–8].

<sup>59</sup> N. Rhodes, *The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature*, New York, 1992, p. 150; Wilson-Okamura (n. 33 above), p. 106.

<sup>60</sup> E.g., Jackson glosses 'rammed' as 'crammed' in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (n. 58 above); see also sense 3c (citing Jonson's 'rammed with life') in 'ram, v.1', *OED Online*, retrieved 1 December 2019, from <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157723?rskey=NTiK1A&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

<sup>61</sup> 'Le Prince d'Amour' (n. 10 above), p. 477.

Latin. In Ben Jonson's own translation of *Ars poetica* 47–8, Horace explains that a poet wins 'Most worthy praise, when words that common grew/ Are, by thy cunning placing, made mere [i.e., entirely] new.'<sup>62</sup> That would be a good description of what's going on with 'tis rammed with life'. Jonson's Horace would thus follow his own stylistic precepts by fashioning the novel combination 'rammed with life'. Literary history, however, has turned this into a joke on Horace. While this reference, as I have shown, would have been striking but comprehensible for Jonson's audience, for today's readers of *Poetaster*, it has long been obscure. As this line's *callida iunctura* has deteriorated over time into *iunctura callida acris*, Horace has come to sound like Persius. Persius would have found this hilarious. *Sum petulanti splene – cachinno*.

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<sup>62</sup> Ben Jonson, 'Horace His Art of Poetry', ed. C. Burrow, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works Ben Jonson*, 7 vols, Cambridge, 2011–12, VII: 1641, pp. 1–67 (16). Although published posthumously, Jonson's versions of the *Ars poetica* were composed early in his career and Burrow notes that 'He certainly intended, and probably composed, a commentary or preface in about 1605' (p. 3).